

OPTICAL BEAM STEERING USING SMALL ANGLE BEAM STEERING DEVICE

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Statement of Government Interest

[0001] This invention was reduced to practice with Government support under Contract No. DAAH01-01-C-0026 awarded by Defense Advanced Products Research Agency (DARPA). The Government has certain rights in this invention.

Background of the Invention

1. Field of the Invention

[0002] The present invention relates to the steering of optical beams and more particularly to the steering thereof without the need for mechanical gimbals.

2. Description of the Related Art

[0003] Present methods for steering optical beams in laser radar or laser communication systems utilize mechanical gimbals to point a telescope assembly or a mirror in the appropriate direction for beam transmission or reception. Recent developments in liquid crystal optical phase shifting devices enable electronic steering of coherent optical beams. However, these devices permit steering only over small angles (approximately four degrees, one dimension) with efficiencies exceeding 50 percent. Since coverage angles in excess of 90 degrees in two dimensions are typically needed for laser communication and laser radar systems, these devices alone are insufficient in themselves to build a complex system without gimbals.

[0004] The article entitled Optical Phased Array Technology, Proceedings of the IEEE. VOL. 84, NO. 2, February 1996, pages 268-298, discloses an optical phased array beam steerer suitable for small angle beam steering. Section II, Overview of Liquid Crystal Optical Phased Array Concepts, shows that with current liquid crystal materials high efficiencies can only be achieved for small steering angles. As a specific example, a phased array with center-to-center spacing of 2 μm , a liquid crystal layer thickness of 5 μm , and operating at a wavelength of 1.55 μm will have an efficiency greater than 50 % only for steering angles less than 5 degrees, based on the equations presented in this reference.

Summary

[0005] The present invention is an optical beam steering system for steering an optical beam. In one broad aspect, the system serves as a transmitter and comprises an optics system; a plurality of source elements positioned on the focal plane; and, a small angle beam steerer. The plurality of source elements are each capable of providing a point source of radiation to the optics system. The optics system provides a collimated output. The small angle beam steerer receives the collimated output and redirects the collimated output through a small angular deviation. The redirected output is thus transmitted in a desired direction without a need for mechanical gimbals and is capable of covering a large angular range with respect to the optical axis of the optics system.

[0006] In another broad aspect the optical beam steering system serves as a receiver. In this aspect the optical beam steering system includes a small angle beam steerer; an optics system; and, a plurality of detector elements. The small angle beam steerer receives a collimated laser beam and redirects the collimated laser beam through a small angular deviation. The optics system has a focal plane and an optical axis. The redirected laser beam is focused onto the focal plane. The detector elements are positioned on the focal plane. Each detector element is capable of receiving the focused laser beam from a desired direction without a need for mechanical gimbals, the desired direction capable of covering a large angular range with respect to the optical axis.

[0007] Obviating the need for mechanical gimbals provides substantial cost savings. Precision mechanical gimbals are costly to fabricate and bulky to package. Embodiments of the present invention may allow for utilization of automated techniques developed in the electronics industry for packaging sources and detectors on electronics boards. These techniques enable fabrication of the invention at a much lower cost than of a precision mechanical system.

Brief Description of the Drawings

[0008] Figure 1 is a schematic view of a preferred embodiment of the optical beam steering system of the present invention.

[0009] Figure 2 is a schematic illustration showing the use of laser diodes and optical fibers used as source elements so that the optical beam steering system operates as a transmitter.

[0010] Figure 3 is a schematic illustration showing the use of an optical switching network, the optical beam steering system operating as a transmitter.

[0011] Figure 4 is a schematic illustration showing the use of vertical cavity surface emitting lasers (VCSEL's) as source elements, the optical beam steering system operating as a transmitter.

[0012] Figure 5 is a schematic illustration showing the use of detector elements on the focal plane so that the optical beam steering system operates as a receiver.

Detailed Description of the Invention

[0013] Referring to the drawings and the characters of reference marked thereon Fig. 1 illustrates a preferred embodiment of the present invention, designated generally as 10. The optical beam steering system 10 includes an optics system 12, a plurality of source elements 14 and a small angle beam steerer 16. The source elements 14 are positioned on a focal plane 18 of the optics system 12.

[0014] The optics system 12 may comprise a wide angle lens such as a conventional 20mm focal length wide angle lens as used in 35mm photography or less conventional designs such as used in hemispherical projection systems. Alternatively, reflective optics may be used.

[0015] The small angle beam steerer 16 may be an optical phased array such as a transmission mode optical phased array beam steerer formed of a 1-D array of equi-spaced liquid crystal phase shifters. An example of such an optical phased array is described in the article entitled Optical Phased Array Technology, Proceedings of the IEEE. VOL. 84, NO. 2, February 1996, page 274. The inner surface of one transparent substrate is photo-lithographically patterned with transparent, conducting, striped electrodes having the desired spacing for the phase shifters in the array. The active aperture of the array is so patterned. The inside of another substrate is coated with a uniform, transparent, conducting ground plane. Both substrates have inner surfaces prepared to effect quiescent liquid crystal alignment. Application of a voltage between any given striped electrode and the underlying ground plane creates a 1-D phase shifter in the liquid crystal volume underlying the patterned electrode. The optical phased array has an efficiency that depends on the number of phase levels available and the thickness of the liquid crystal. For current liquid crystal materials and a wavelength of 1550 nm, an efficiency of 0.7 may be achieved with a steering angle of approximately three degrees in one dimension.

[0016] Other small angle beam steerers 16 may be, for example, acousto-optic devices or electro optic crystal devices. Commercial 2-D acousto-optic beam steering devices are available with apertures in the 5 to 7mm range and steering angles of approximately three degrees. Electro-optic steering devices consisting of, for example, a lithium niobate crystal with a quadrapole electrode configuration may be used. While these devices have similar aperture and beam steering range, their large size and high voltage requirements make them less suitable than the optical phased array or acousto-optic devices.

[0017] As herein, the term "small" angle beam steerer refers to steering in a range of between about 0-5 degrees.

[0018] In a first broad aspect, the optical beam steering system 10 operates as a transmitter. The source elements 14 are positioned on the focal plane 18 and are each capable of providing a point

source of radiation to the optics system 12. The optics system 12 provides a collimated output 20. This collimated output of the optics system 12 may have a relatively large angular deviation, Δ_1 . The small angle beam steerer 16 receives the collimated output 20 and redirects the collimated output through a small angular deviation, Δ_2 . The redirected output 22 is thus being transmitted in a desired direction without a need for mechanical gimbals. This desired direction is capable of covering a large angular range with respect to the optical axis 24.

[0019] In a second broad aspect, the optical beam steering system 10 operates as a receiver. The small angle beam steerer 16 receives a collimated laser beam 22 and redirects the collimated laser beam through a small angular deviation, Δ_2 . The optics system 12 focuses the redirected laser beam 20 onto the focal plane 18. In this broad aspect, a plurality of detector elements 14 are positioned on the focal plane 18. Each detector element 14 is capable of receiving the focused laser beam from a desired direction without a need for mechanical gimbals. The desired direction is capable of covering a large angular range with respect to said optical axis.

[0020] Referring now to Figure 2, an embodiment of source elements is illustrated in which these source elements comprise a 2-dimensional optical fiber array, designated generally as 25. The optical fiber array 25 comprises a plurality of laser diodes 26 in conjunction with optical fibers 28. A perforated metal or ceramic plate 30 is used to support the end of each optical fiber 28. Conventional telecom laser diodes of up to 1 watt (typically about 10-100 mW) such as manufactured by Nortel or Alcatel may be used. The optical fibers may be of the single mode type. Use of this type of source element provides a high power implementation of the optical beam steering system being implemented as a transmitter.

[0021] Referring now to Figure 3, an embodiment is illustrated in which the source elements comprise an optical switching network, designated generally as 32. The switching network 32 illustrated is shown by way of illustration and not limitation. A single laser diode is connected via an optical fiber 36 to an optical switching device 38. Device 38 is, in turn, connected to a plurality of optical switching devices 40 that have optical fibers supported on the focal plane 42, as described above. The optical switching devices 38,40 may be, for example, binary waveguide devices, such as 1x2 lithium niobate electro-optic devices; 1xN lithium niobate electro-optic devices; 1xN MEMS devices, such as manufactured by Lucent technologies; or, 1xN mechanical switches such as used in the telephone fiber industry.

[0022] Referring now to Figure 4, an embodiment is illustrated in which vertical cavity surface emitting lasers (VCSEL's) 44 are positioned on a focal plane 46 and are utilized as source elements for the optical beam steering system being implemented as a transmitter. Such VCSEL's 44 are manufactured by, for example, Honeywell.

[0023] Referring now to Figure 5, a plurality of detectors 48 are positioned on a focal plane 50 so that the optical beam steering system is implemented as a receiver. The detectors 48 may be, for

example, PIN's or APD's or other standard telecom detectors manufactured, for example, by Nortel or Alcatel.

[0024] Utilization of the present invention as a transmitter will be illustrated in the following example. Suppose a 20 mm focal length optical element is selected. Then, to cover a 90 X 90 degree field of regard, the sources will have to span 40 X 40 mm area in the focal plane. If the small angle steering device can steer through 5 degrees, then 18 X 18 point sources in the focal plane will be required to fully cover the field of regard. This focal plane can be assembled using individual VCSEL chips mounted on a circuit board utilizing automated electronics assembly equipment. The fine steering system is fabricated using commercial techniques developed for liquid crystal displays. Thus, a large angle beam steering system can be built without precision mechanical gimbals.

[0025] Thus, while the preferred embodiments of the devices and methods have been described in reference to the environment in which they were developed, they are merely illustrative of the principles of the inventions. Other embodiments and configurations may be devised without departing from the spirit of the inventions and the scope of the appended claims.